

Chapter XIX

Physical Love

By the time Oskar was seven months old, still too early for sexual interest in his kind, his capacity for love had grown to where he had room in his heart for another sweetheart. In no way did his fascination with Trash diminish. It was just that his heart had grown so big it could envelope still another, with equal longing and depth of feeling. In searching to find his second mate, Oskar was true to Trash and to her kind.

All his life he had been near a beautiful red thing, but like the boy who doesn't realize until he reaches a certain age how transcendently beautiful is the girl next door, Oskar showed no interest in her. It might even be said he showed disdain, for all his life she had been in the same place, at the end of the lane, prosaically doing nothing but holding sand, sand that we scattered on the lane and the road against the slippery frosts of winter.

Then, one day in about his seventh month, suddenly his eye saw something it had never noted before, some spark of beauty, some hidden charm denied my eye. He took the full measure of her 55 gallons and was lost, lost in the swirl of his own great emotion. "Sand", for we gave her ^{too,} a respectable name, also, was just as dear to Oskar as Trash, and Trash was no less dear than Sand. He loved them both with

loud wooing and a constant rubbing against them that was perplexing to the eyes and minds of people accustomed to demonstrations of love people-style. His was goose-style, but it was love, nonetheless, love as only a goose could make love to barrels.

His heart was never sore for unrequited love, for he had no real rival for their affections, which existed only in his mind anyway. And in his mind they reciprocated his emotion with passion equal to his own. But he imagined, with that wild intensity of Jealous lovers the world over, and of the goose world in particular, that all the world lusted for them.

First, he thought the cats were rivals for Trash, for Trash stands near where the cats' table is set.

"Away!" he would honk at them with ferocity matched by his biting as he charged up to chase them, broad feet spanking the ground with a flat "splop" sound, head and neck lowered menacingly, "she's mine - all mine, you hear - stay away or I'll kill you." He looked and acted fierce enough to mean it, too. Now it was not easy for one of the cats, Sister, to accommodate him, for Sister had an earlier claim of a different sort to Trash. She was Sister's preferred maternity ward, the place of all places where she preferred to bring forth her unending flow of kittens, almost always as black as she and always invisible in the depths of the barrel. Whenever Sister was due, we had to examine the barrel carefully before using it. As so often happens with animals, we learned of this fixation of Sister's in the midst of what almost became a gruesome tragedy. Just as smoke ~~had~~ ^{was} began to furl up from the paper a third filling the barrel, Sister rushed up and sprang into it. She dug madly into the papers with her

forepaws and leaped out, a still-sightless kitten in her mouth. I singed my hands pulling out the burning pieces, but in time to save the rest of the litter. With all the many warm and secure places fixed up in the various outbuildings for cat ^{lying in} ~~maternity wards~~ ^{places}, that she knew of ^{and} should have used, it is yet possible to explain Sister's persistent selection of this most hazardous location, which is also entirely unprotected from the sun, rain or wind. She believed my wife to be her mother. Her natural mother had been killed before her eyes opened. Lil had dropper-raised her, assisted by all the other cats. Sister had to be near Lil, her mother, as Spotsy had to be near Lil, her daughter.

After Oskar reached his premature manhood, we had to restrain Sister in a building from which she could not escape in anticipation of her confinement. This, naturally, meant extra work, for food and water had to be carried to her twice daily. But it did protect her and the kittens from Oskar's jealous rage and increased the cat population, already exploded. There is no telling what he might have done to the helpless kittens in his rage and unthinking mistrust of anybody and anything. He was capable of anything, even murder.

When the numerous kittens of various mothers were small but able to run short distances, they often played with each other's and their own tails, preferably around the barrel, whose round shape gave them endless opportunities for innumerable variations in their sport. They could first run away and, if they ran fast enough, could become the chaser rather than the chased, taking the pursuer by feigned surprise as they sprang on his back and rolled him over in mock mortal combat. They could short-cut underneath it, for it was raised almost

two inches above the ground for air circulation. They could climb on the supporting bricks on the inside and be hidden from the outside. Things like that and the other numerous improvisations of kittens enhanced their sport and fun around the barrel. Oskar would have none of it. If anything moved, no matter how small it was or what its nature, it was a rival and he attacked. The kittens learned to save themselves by squeezing underneath the barrel. Until they could peer out ~~from under the barrel~~ and be sure he had gone, they stayed there, inside the limiting area of the shell. They learned to do so patiently, for Oskar was a very jealous lover.

(Picture) No rival was too big for Oskar to tackle. His fighting heart was as great as his loving heart. So he was always having to ^{rescue} save Sand from the fancied lasciviousness of some automobile that parked near her or ^{was} just passed by ~~her~~ while he was with her.

"My goodness! What's happening?" one young matron exclaimed as she drove in for a donation for the United Nations' Children's Fund. Inside her car she could hear only a metallic tattoo. Outside, ^{Sand's} was Oskar, who had been invisibly courting the opposite side of ~~Sand~~ when the lady parked. He was biting and biting, in audible anger, at her right front fender.

^{eventually} In Oskar's mind, the entire car was his rival, not just the fender or a door or the bumper. But in the course of his numerous attacks on these ceaseless challenges to Sand's exclusive love, he learned that the best, or at least the softest, part of the car to assault was the tires. He waged more campaigns against right-side tires than I can count, for people always drove in forward rather

backing in. Whichever tire was closer was the one he assailed. He could never get a hold on them, naturally, so he could neither bite nor tear them, as he tried, but he surely could - and did - hammer away at them with his bill. And as long as the car was close to Sand, he fought, untroubled by either the lack of resistance by his adversary or his own lack of success, for as long as it remained near Sand it was, to him, a threat. And there was no threat he would not battle.

It made no difference how well he knew the driver of the car. The friendly, familiar voice coming from inside the car in no way slaked his anger and jealousy. In Oskar's mind, even a trusted friend might be a lecherous rival once he had a chance to fall in love with Sand. And, naturally, as Oskar saw it, how could anyone not fall in love with wonderful, beautiful Sand?

Charlotte Vetter, whose husband "Skip" is a charter member of the cult of Oskar and who herself is one of his devotees, had to park her car elsewhere once Oskar fell in love with Sand. The first time ^{Charlotte} she visited us after Oskar's expanded love interest, like the careful driver she is, as always she entered the lane slowly. She saw

Oskar as he charged her Comet and stopped, fearing to run him over.

(picture)

"What are you up to, Oskar?" she asked. She had known Oskar all his life, had often fed him, and considered him a pal.

"Honk, honk, honk away!" he replied in unmistakeable wrath. Carefully, after trying unsuccessfully to ^{from the car} shepherd him away, that's what she did. As the Comet eased past the barrel, Oskar ran alongside, continuously attacking its front tire. ~~I saw it and had a mov~~

e camera in my hand while he was ^{d/}going it. It is a wonder he didn't get his hammering head flattened in the stones.

Perhaps because the end of the lane was more private, although a lack of privacy seemed to have no effect on his amatory pursuits, perhaps because he was captivated by other of her charms not apparent to people, Oskar caressed Sand more than he did Trash. On the other hand, he kissed Trash more than he kissed Sand. He spent hours rubbing against the red one, cooing like a moon-struck, inexperienced schoolboy. First he rubbed her clockwise, then he stroked her counterclockwise, first upward, then down. For his limited possibilities, he displayed an inventiveness in his caresses; he was not monotonous. He used both sides of his body, and all the surfaces of his round neck. He even fondled her with the back of his neck and the top of his head, caresses that only a neck as long and supple as his permitted. But the most original technique he perfected, if a passion as sincere and ardent as his can be thought to have been pressed by so mechanical a means as a preconceived method, by anything but a spontaneously expressed, uncontrollable expression of love, involved the use of the bottom of his lower mandible.

Standing first with his face to her, Oskar would nibble her "cheek" while mumbling sweet tender nothings in the lowest modulations of his honking, all the while tickling her with sweeping, grazing nibbles in wild and imaginative parabolas and semicircles. Little by little as he was himself stimulated, he rose higher and higher until he stretched as close to her "lip" as his outstretched neck and tip-toeing allowed. Then, with the orange mandible as flat and as close to her red "cheek" as he could press it, he danced around her, circle

after circle, in tiny jumps, at the crest of which he would nip gently at the air that pressed his love's cheek.

It was an eloquent exposition of the delicacy of his feeling and an impressive demonstration of the imaginativeness and originality of his love-play.

The public character of his courtships in no way embarrassed him, though often we thought they should. People do not approve public display of the most intimate relationships. Oskar could not have cared less for the opinion of society. When he loved, he loved, without restraint or inhibition. Once, for a split second, I thought he was embarrassed, but this was but a fleeting, mental pun, the nature of which I didn't immediately recognize. I thought for that fraction of an instant that he was blushing. Immediately, of course, I realized he could not blush.

His face, however, was red, red as though with a guilty blush.

"What have you been into, fellow?" I asked him.

His response was a couple of perfunctory unilluminating *gabbles* ~~honks~~, betraying neither guilt nor any other feeling, almost a grunt.

"Your face is all red," I continued.

His reply was similar and equally uninformative. He could not have cared less, if he understood. I was baffled and curious, not worried, for he was in obvious good health. He was always into something, always survived it, and, in the course of time, what he had done or been into usually became clear.

Several days later I was carrying several buckets of eggs up from the henhouse, walking along the road. When I turned into the lane, I became aware of a slight difference in what my eye was accus-

tomed to, something that just was not like it had been; a slight alteration, because it was not obvious, but nonetheless a change. Depositing the eggs in the house, I went back to the end of the lane out of annoyance and curiosity more than anything else, for clearly nothing serious was wrong. Oskar accompanied me, chattering a complaint about something I didn't grasp.

He knew he was not allowed on the road, so he stopped alongside Sand. I continued to the junction of the road and the lane and then turned around to seek the thing that was not as it had always been. No sooner had I turned than it all became clear. There was Oskar standing by Sand. His face was the same color she was! And more than his face. His upper breast was also tinged with a faint rose hue.

Examination of Sand revealed that, as he had caressed her, hard as he had rubbed against her, her paint had sloughed off on him. And another secret was exposed. In an earlier life, Sand had been green. Someone, somewhere in her past, had garbed her in a pale raiment, a color like that of grass that has been denied the sun, a light shade that had the suggestion of yellow in it.

Oskar's love, as it developed, had nothing to do with her color, He must have ^{ached} asked for her because of what she was, not what she seemed to be, for the disclosing of her former appearance, if anything, served only to cause the blood to course faster through his veins. Shortly thereafter, for the first time, I saw him try to embrace the graceful ~~sym~~metrical, but very ample, curve of her body. He opened his great wings as though to smother her in them, extended his neck, scratched with his feet, but to no avail. Her bulk, if not her disposition,

denied him. He tried and tried, his rage and frustration mounting which his impatience. He pleaded, cajoled and demanded. His words were unclear, all sounding like excited honks with a superimposed wail, but his meaning was obvious. His attempt to couple failed.

He stalked off to seek sympathy from Trash, by whose side he remained for an hour or so, muttering and complaining, and not only under his breath.

This was, of course, a very unusual performance for a gander - for anything, but especially for a gander, who is the soul of dignity. It was particularly unusual because of the time of the year. The days were shortening as the winter's cold and barrenness approached. Nature has a grand yet simple system for most of her children, particularly the birds. Except for a few species, like the gibbons, a tiny proportion of all the living things in her realm, sex and reproduction are inextricably entwined. There is no sex life, not even a sex interest, that has any other purpose, certainly not for pleasure ^{alone.} Only when the days begin again to lengthen, when the coming abundance of spring and amelioration of the weather, both necessary for food and survival of the young, are portended by ^{each succeeding day's} increasing duration of light, only then do the creatures become interested in or capable of sex. With most birds, this is a brief interval in their lives, ending when the requisite few eggs are laid. With the setting of the female on her eggs, the hormones in the body of the male also recede for another year, to swell out again with the tickling of his pituitary gland by the next year's gain in the light-cycle of the day. Never do males attempt to copulate with females not in oestrous, the "heat" period of the resurgence of the estrogens.

Never, that is, except for Oskar. Oskar's ideas overpowered his chemistry.

While he sought sympathy from Trash, his already uncontrollable passion rose to a blinding fury. Casting all restraint, pride and decency to the winds, he arose and rushed back to Sand, announcing his intentions, as though they were not already clear, in the loudest, least decorous language. Straight through the sward he ran at her, not deigning even to follow the curve of the lane. At her, full-tilt in the air he threw himself, only to bounce off her side, repelled. Picking himself up and with his mind only slightly in control of his libido, he begged, honking loud and impatient overtures while he strutted and pranced around her. These were not the tender and considerate preludes a female is entitled to expect from her mate, the stimulation of the mind that warms and readies the body. They were not even a supplication. They were a demand, a peremptory insistence, almost a threat. He may have intended saying, pleadingly, "Please, lovely, please," but it came out, "Now, damn it, or else."

And then he tried again to mount her.

Alas, poor Oskar. His glands told him only the positions of geese, where the gander almost walks onto the goose's back and holds his ungainly body in place with a firm grip on the back of her neck. Oskar could not bite a hold on Sand, try as he might, nor had she a back on which gravity permitted her to receive him. He was foiled in his attempt at rape - for he was a boor; it was naught else - an attempt that he repeated again and again, driven by his rage and frustration and the torment within him.

He abandoned Sand and made the same proposition to Trash, in

the same impassioned and inconsiderate manner. He got the same rebuff.

Shattered in spirit, aching in body and baffled in mind, alone and miserable, he retreated to the solitude of the underneath of the trailer not far from the back of the house and almost midpoint between his enamoras.

I saw all of this. Without shame I admit I did not once laugh at the poor fellow. Boorish, pretentious and loud as he was, he was still a fellow desolated by the pain of unrequited love. Unnatural and unseasonal as it was, it was his passion, his genuine emotion, and its normal expression was denied him.

Thereafter Oskar retreated to his previous relationship with his two ladies. He was restricted to petting. That he accepted, finding it better than nothing.

The unrequited desire boiled up again from time to time, but never with such spectacular ambition. Once or twice he sought service from the cats. On another occasion, when he found a pair of ducks with their feet tied, lying on the ground near the stationwagon while I searched for a box in which to carry them, he tried to get from them what his barrels had denied him. Their insufficient size and their recumbent positions, on their sides with their feet extended, did not dismay him. Nor did he trouble to distinguish one end from the other or one sex from the other. Blindly, unthinkingly, he tried, releasing his anger in biting me as I lifted them to take them to their new home.

Never again did I see Oskar attempt intercourse, with his two real loves or any passing thing that intruded itself into his domain.

I can only hope that, if he has not long since been in the oven, he is where he will have and recognize for what she is, a goose all of his own.